

### Romania's Role in the Process of Emergency Assistance for the Ukrainian Refugees in Times of Crisis

Balan, Claudia; Cozma, Alexandra

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## Article

# Romania's Role in the Process of Emergency Assistance for the Ukrainian Refugees in Times of Crisis

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**Abstract:** *The magnitude of the influx of Ukrainian refugees, generated by the intensification of Russia's aggression in Ukraine in 2022, caught the European Union and especially the Eastern European member states by surprise. The main objective of this article is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the emergency response provided by Romania, including the governmental measures adopted by Romanian authorities in collaboration with UNHCR and IOM, supported by civil society through volunteering. This study focuses specifically on examining and observing the evolution of Romania's mechanisms of emergency response and assistance, as well as the legislative changes that occurred as a result of the significant influx of Ukrainian refugees on Romanian territory in the first four months following the escalation of the war (February – May 2022).*

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## Claudia BĂLAN

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, PhD Student, Bucharest, Romania; ORCID: 0009-0002-1087-6105; [claudia.balan.22@drd.snsa.ro](mailto:claudia.balan.22@drd.snsa.ro)

## Alexandra COZMA

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, PhD Student, Bucharest, Romania; ORCID: 0009-0002-6294-4659; [alexandra.cozma.22@drd.snsa.ro](mailto:alexandra.cozma.22@drd.snsa.ro)

*To achieve this objective, official documents provided by the Romanian Government, the Strategic Co-ordination Group – Humanitarian Assistance, and reports provided by UNHCR and IOM will be analysed, with the primary method being content analysis. The case of Romania is a relevant study because prior to 2022, unlike other EU Eastern member states, it was not on the transit route of refugees and till today is not a full member of the Schengen area, thus through the analysis of the Romanian response, it can be determined whether Romania represents an example of best practices in emergency assistance regarding refugee management.*

**Keywords:** *Emergency assistance, IOM, Romania, UNHCR, Ukrainian refugees.*

## 1. Introduction

Over the past decade, the European Union has witnessed a succession of crises, starting with the Eurozone financial crisis in 2009 and culminating in the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in 2022. As the EU sought to recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the in-

tensification of Russian aggression in Ukraine, starting on February 24, 2022, marks a significant turning point in the modern history of the European Union. This event places an already shaken Union facing a massive threat to security due to other crises. This ongoing conflict has created one of the largest humanitarian crises the EU has faced since the end of World War II, with 30,457 civilian casualties recorded (Statista, 2024) and causing the largest wave of refugees, with approximately 6 million Ukrainian refugees recorded from the escalation of the conflict until 2024 (UNHCR, 2024). Although Russia's invasion took European Union member states by surprise, they, along with EU institutions, demonstrated astonishing management capacity by acting together against the violations of international law committed by Russia, unanimously agreeing on 13 packages of sanctions (Council of the EU, 2024), and providing the necessary humanitarian support for those fleeing their country due to the war, granting Temporary Protection to approximately four million individuals (Eurostat, 2024). This represents a milestone in the history of the European Union, being the first time its member states have formulated a security commitment in favour of a third country.

The consequences and impact of this humanitarian crisis on Ukraine are indisputable, with extensive international implications as well as on neighbouring countries, which find themselves on the front line of managing refugee flows. In this context, this article aims to analyse Romania's emergency response, a country located at the European Union's border with a significant emigration rate, ranking 17th among global migration origin countries in 2021 (IOM, 2021). Although until recently the integration of third-country nationals has not been a central point on Romania's political agenda, this crisis has generated a new dynamic and an increased need for adaptation and response from Romanian authorities.

The main objective of this article is to provide a comprehensive analysis of Romania's emergency response, including the governmental measures adopted by Romanian authorities in collaboration with UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) and IOM (International Organization for Migration), supported by civil society through volunteering. This research predominantly focuses on analysing and observing Romania's progress regarding its emergency response and assistance mechanisms, for the Ukrainian refugees on Romanian territory in the first four months since the escalation of the war (February – May 2022). This period was selected due to the significant presence of refugees at Romania's borders, with its relevance emphasized by the implementation of an extensive series of initiatives over the course of those four months aimed at managing migratory flows.

Methodologically, the research approach will involve a combined qualitative and quantitative methodology, with an emphasis on qualitative tools. The analysis will primarily focus on official documents provided by the Romanian Government, the Strategic Coordination Group for Humanitarian Assistance, as well as reports provided by UNHCR and IOM, with content analysis being the main method. Quantitative research will involve the use of statistics and surveys published by Eurostat, the European Commission, and the Migration Data Portal. The purpose of this approach is to provide an objective perspective based on numerical data on the phenomenon of migration and the measures adopted by Romania in the context of the humanitarian crisis.

In light of the current international context, characterized by overlapping crises, this article addresses an extremely relevant subject regarding security assurance at both national and European levels, in the face of an external migration situation differing from those previously faced by the European Union.

## 2. Context

To understand the significance of the management mechanisms adopted and Romania's role in the current context of the Ukraine invasion, it is essential to analyse the reasons why this crisis is considered an unprecedented humanitarian one for the European Union and its member states, and what precisely sets it apart from other crises the European Union has experienced in recent years. The notion of a humanitarian crisis lacks a universally accepted definition, varying from specific descriptions to conceptualizations emphasizing the need for external intervention. Essentially, a humanitarian crisis can be defined as „an event or series of events that constitute a critical threat to the health, security, or welfare of a community or large group of people, usually over a wide area“ (Concern Worldwide, 2022). However, to address its implications and consequences on the population, significant external assistance and resources are required, as well as a multisectoral response involving a wide range of international humanitarian actors (UNICEF, 2020). As observed in discussions on humanitarian crises, human rights become the primary aspect. In this perspective, responding to such crises, particularly protecting human rights, constitutes a crucial element of humanitarian action. It is essential for this response to be adequate, as the absence of adequate human rights protection can lead to extensive negative consequences. These include reducing chances of quick recovery, fuelling existing tensions, and ultimately exacerbating the crisis (UN Human Rights, 2023), in a manner that can be likened to a „domino“ effect.

In the context of the large-scale aggression war against Ukraine, the humanitarian impact is severe; according to the report released by the UN Human Rights (2024), from the beginning of the war until February 2024, more than 10,000 civilians have been killed, and almost 20,000 have been injured. In addition to the large number of civilian casualties recorded so far, over the two years since the war escalated, Russian attacks with explosive weapons have greatly affected Ukraine's infrastructure. According to monitoring by the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine (2024), hostilities have affected a total of 1,072 educational institutions and 465 medical facilities since February 24, 2022. Moreover, attacks have caused damage and destruction to critical infrastructure such as the country's energy infrastructure, imposing significant difficulties on the civilian population by disrupting electricity and heating services (UN, 2024).

Another significant consequence of the invasion is the generation of one of the largest refugee crises globally, as hostilities continue to force people, especially women and children, to flee the war and cross borders into neighbouring European states, such as Romania. In recent decades, the European Union has witnessed a series of major migration crises, including the Syrian refugee crisis in 2014, the Afghan refugee crisis in 2021, and the refugee crisis at the border between Poland and Belarus in 2021. However, each of these crises is unique in its own right, and currently, the European Union faces a humanitarian crisis of unprecedented proportions. Experts in international relations have already identified the main aspects that differentiate the refugee crisis in 2022 from the aforementioned crises; as outlined by Mascareñas (2022), these aspects include geographic and cultural proximity, recent migration history, border openness policy, and the retransformation of asylum into a geopolitical issue.

Of course, it is worth mentioning the difference in approach between the European Union and its member states to the situation generated by the influx of Ukrainian refugees, specifically maintaining an open border policy. In the specialist literature, the „attitude change“ of

the member states has been thoroughly analysed (Börzel, 2023; Mascareñas, 2022; Åslund, 2022), highlighting the differences between the crisis generated by the escalation of the war in Ukraine and the migration crisis of 2015, differences based on the different perception of these two events. It is noteworthy that, unlike other crises, such as that in 2015, solidarity with Ukraine and support for its national independence were largely motivated by a discourse of identity focusing on the concept of order (who we are) rather than the concept of border (who belongs to us) (Börzel, 2023). This identity discourse generated solidarity among EU member states in managing the crisis and generated support for Ukraine, including regarding the perspective of EU accession.

Regardless of the methods adopted to manage these crises or how they were perceived (which led to different approaches), these events have emphasized the politicization and securitization of migration, necessitating closer cooperation at supranational level (the European Union and its member states), but also at national level (national institutions and non-governmental organizations). This article addresses a subject of crucial importance in the current context, focusing on ensuring both European and national security by analysing the methods of managing refugee flows in a new case of external migration, adopted by national institutions and NGOs. In this context, Romania represents an important actor, being a state located in the proximity of the conflict and, especially, at the external border of the European Union.

Romania represents an important case study for analysing the evolution in migration management, having a predominant history as a transit and emigration country. However, in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, a significant transformation in the migration landscape is observed, reflected in the increased requests for asylum in the country according to available statistical data. This transformation brings to the forefront the need to investigate and understand how a member state at the external border of the European Union, which previously had limited experience in managing migration, addresses and manages refugee flows in a new and dynamic context. By closely analysing Romania's reactions and adaptation of national policies, a deeper understanding of the complexity of the migration management process in a European framework can be obtained.

### **3. Romania's Response in the face of a humanitarian crisis**

Following the influx of displaced refugees from Ukraine that started in February 2022, Romania has undertaken a lot of actions aimed at addressing the immediate needs of the Ukrainian refugees. The Romanian Government established a set of information points at the border in order to offer assistance, in order to cover the basic needs and to build Regional Integration Centres to facilitate the process of receiving and eventually integrating the displaced people in cooperation with non-governmental and international groups. Additionally, both short- and long-term objectives were outlined in a legislative and regulatory framework, which included the „National Plan of Measures for the Protection and Inclusion of Displaced Persons from Ukraine“ (Office of the Prime Minister, 2023).

The authorities provided places to sleep in collective accommodation centres and supported housing assistance initiatives which took the form of online platforms such as the „Dopomoha“ and „Un Acoperis“. These platforms have facilitated cooperation between hosts and displaced persons, by establishing a framework for the provision of accommodation and ensuring that established standards are met (Office of the Prime Minister, 2023). The „Un

Acoperis“ platform is under the aegis of the Romanian Government in partnership with UNHCR, IOM Romania and DSU and is managed by the National Centre for Command and Coordination of Intervention (CNCCI), being developed by Code for Romania. The platform is a digital tool, dedicated to people who meet the eligibility requirements, so, can benefit from this service: people who have domicile or residence in Ukraine and who have left the territory as a result of the war, whether or not they have the citizenship of the Ukrainian state; people who can no longer return to Ukraine because of the war; and any person who can prove residence on Ukrainian territory with an identity card or another way to prove this (Un Acoperis). The „Dopomoha“ platform presents the rights of beneficiaries of temporary protection, as well as the right to work, education, health care, family reunification, social services, accommodation, etc. In addition to this informative section, the platform constantly presents legislative changes, changes in the assistance services offered by non-governmental organizations, the private sector and the government (Dopomoha).

According to the adopted legislation, we can see that, Point 5, Article I of the Emergency Ordinance No. 20 of 7 March 2022 (published in the Official Monitor No. 231 of 8 March 2022) reiterates that “Persons hosting foreign citizens or stateless persons in special situations, coming from the area of armed conflict in Ukraine, shall be reimbursed from the budget of the County Emergency Inspectorates/Inspectorate for Emergency Situations Bucharest-Ilfov for food and accommodation expenses in the amount of 20 lei/day/person hosted for food and 50 lei/day/person hosted for accommodation.” (Emergency Ordinance, no. 20 of 7 March 2022). Another Emergency Ordinance that was adopted in early 2022 was referring to the granting of humanitarian support and assistance by the Romanian State to foreign citizens or stateless persons in special situations from the area of armed conflict in Ukraine. Adopted on the 27 February 2022, the Ordinance specified that in order to ensure that foreign nationals or stateless persons in special situations coming from the area of armed conflict in Ukraine and entering Romania without requesting protection under Law No 122/2006 on asylum in Romania, as subsequently amended and supplemented, receive adequate conditions in temporary camps for accommodation and human assistance, Romania will cooperate with its partners to find and implement the best solutions to the political, security, and humanitarian problems caused by this humanitarian crisis. (Emergency Ordinance nr. 15, from 27 of February 2022).

The legislative changes of assistance were followed by the implementation of the 50/20 financial scheme for people who housed displaced people or rented an apartment or room to people from Ukraine. The legal basis of the programme was Decision No. 336 regarding the establishment of the amount, conditions, and mechanism for granting lump sums according to Emergency Ordinance No. 15/2022 of the Government regarding the provision of support and humanitarian assistance by the Romanian state to foreign citizens or stateless persons in exceptional situations, originating from the armed conflict zone in Ukraine. Subsequent government support in the form of direct financial assistance to displaced persons was aimed at managing the evolving situation, defining the role of hosts and guests and identifying sustainable solutions.

People granted temporary protection were issued with a residence permit, allowing them immediate access to the labour market, health services, education and social support networks. In the twelve Regional Integration Centres, displaced persons from Ukraine had access to a wide range of services, including information and counselling, interpretation for interaction with local authorities, Romanian language courses, socio-cultural and educational activities, as

well as psychological and medical support. International organizations such as UNHCR and IOM have been involved in coordinating relief efforts and supporting other actors, including non-governmental organizations such as the Romanian Red Cross (RRC).

In order to understand the action undertaken by the NGO's mentioned above, we are going to do a summary of the actions that they have undertaken. Complementary to the 50/20 programme, UNHCR granted 630 lei (Romanian currency) per person for a maximum of four months, while the Romanian Red Cross gave qualified households a one-time payment of 568 lei per person, and it is also important to mention that those who were most in need received priority. The Romanian Red Cross sought to provide access to necessary medical treatments in Romania for those who had been displaced from Ukraine, especially through the Health Caravan initiative, which was carried out in partnership with the French Red Cross. A number of services were offered, including medical assistance, recreational and psychosocial activities, kindergarten and after-school programs, first aid courses, Romanian and English language courses, food, hygiene products, clothing, financial assistance, and help finding employment. Six Health Promotion Centres were established in important cities, and a Mobile Caravan with six medical units operated in 14 counties (Health Caravan, Romanian Red Cross website).

The Department for Emergency Situations (DSU), UNHCR, and CNRR, along with other protection partners, created educational materials on the conditions outlined for the first and second months, and distributed the information to refugees via social media and communication channels (WhatsApp and Telegram) in order to improve communication with the refugee community about the government assistance program (UNHCR, 2023). Aside from that, UNHCR provided financial assistance in May 2022 for 7700 refugees out of a target of 35000 vulnerable people. Regarding PSEA (Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse) also in May a training was organized for people who come in direct contact with Ukrainian refugees, but also to facilitate peer to peer information and experience exchange (UNHCR, 2023). Aside from the training organized for the staff, UNHCR organized one for the beneficiaries, in Constanta, in order to help them with the registering process on the platforms also, some of the topics that were also opened were related to the registration for jobs and education. Regarding the job aspect, also in Constanta, UNHCR and Jobs4Ukraine provided support to a job fair held by the local employment agency (UNHCR, 2023).

IOM Romania established the Ukraine Response in reaction to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and under this initiative, it closely collaborates and coordinates with various partners and stakeholders, including as UN agencies, civil society, the central government, and local authorities (IOM Romania, Ukraine Response 12-month Report, 2023). As for the accommodation and shelter, IOM Romania in partnership with Airbnb. Org has offered up to 30 days accommodation to 1926 people, not only Ukrainians, but also TCN individuals and families that fled Ukraine, summing up to 17281 nights of accommodation (IOM Romania, Ukraine Response 12-month Report, 2023). Complementary with the actions of the Romanian Red Cross, IOM was involved in the medical assistance process, by helping out public health units, public hospitals and social institutions with medical equipment.

From the information presented above we can observe that the assistance offered to the Ukrainian refugees was a work done not only by the state institutions and not only by the NGO's, it was per se, a task force, in order to offer the best solutions to people in need and to try to offer them a sense of normality after the chaos that forced them to leave their country of origin.

## 4. Conclusions

Looking at it from a global perspective, the impact of this conflict has not been limited to refugee flows, but has far-reaching implications, destabilizing the entire European continent and other regions. Significant consequences include economic destabilization by affecting the supply of wheat and other food produced in Ukraine. Food insecurity is thus becoming a major issue, alongside the management of refugee flows, on the agenda of global political leaders (European Council, 2024).

As regards the case of Romania and its handling of the humanitarian crisis in the first months of the conflict, the Government has underlined, through its decisions and actions, the critical importance of prioritizing the maintenance of social cohesion, as seen in the attempt to balance support to displaced persons from Ukraine with assistance to host communities. Regarding exit and integration strategies, in June 2022, the National Plan on Protection and Inclusion of Displaced Persons in Ukraine laid the groundwork for the sustainability of the assistance programmes and potential exit strategies related to long-term options. Another essential aspect to mention is the importance of partnerships and collaborations. Recognising that one organization cannot manage all aspects of hosting, various collaborations, especially public-private-non-profit partnerships, are essential.

Through the answer offered, Romania showed that understanding the landscape is fundamental, and that, while creating new systems of care provision in order to be prepared for a humanitarian crisis, it is essential to continue to support existing initiatives and have a clear understanding, thus ensuring complementarity and avoiding duplication. After the financial assistance, accommodation and access to medical services, the main step that the country had undertaken was to prepare an exit strategy through which the refugees can be helped to integrate into the society. One of the main points for this had taken place in May 2023, when the 50/20 programme has changed, by adding some conditions, like enrolling the minors in school and finding a job in order to continue to receive the financial assistance.

## Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## About the author(s)

Bălan, Claudia. Born in 1998 in Olt county, Claudia Bălan is a PhD candidate (SNSPA) and a junior researcher at the Centre of European Studies of SNSPA and Expert Corporate Fundraising at the Romanian Red Cross. She has a Master degree in the History of international relations at the University of Bucharest and her main field of analysis for the PhD thesis is the assistance for migrants and refugees from Ukraine.

Cozma Alexandra. Born in 1997 in Piatra Neamț, she is pursuing doctoral research on the evolution of EU migration policies. She has worked in various relevant positions, including internships at the Centre for Conflict Prevention and Early Warning. Now, she serves as a junior analyst, focusing on conflict analysis in the Indo-Pacific region. Her activities also include teaching as an associate professor at the University of Defence „Carol I,“ concentrating on seminars on political science and the European Union. Her main research topics focus on the impact of migration, particularly refugees, on international and national security (Juridice, 2023).



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